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## **Are christians a new „people“? Detecting ethnicity and cultural friction in Paul's letters and early christianity**

Vollenweider, Samuel

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Samuel Vollenweider

## Are Christians a New “People”?

### *Detecting Ethnicity and Cultural Friction in Paul’s Letters and Early Christianity*

Abstract (German):

Der Aufsatz fragt nach der Reichweite der Kategorie “Ethnicity”, zunächst in der Schrift “an Diognet”, wo die Christen als „drittes Volk“ (tertium genus) gezeichnet werden. Der 1. Korintherbrief (bes. 1,18–25) und der Römerbrief zeigen, dass Paulus auf ethnische Kategorien zurückgreift, um christliche Identität zu beschreiben.; wichtiger als die Unterscheidung der Christen von Juden und Heiden bzw. Griechen ist aber ihre „theo-ethnische“ Zeichnung als Gottes Volk („Israel“).

Keywords: Ethnicity; Diognetus; Christian Identity; Church; Israel; „Word of the Cross“; Jews and Greeks; „third race“ (tertium genus).

There can be no doubt that the apostle Paul was keenly aware of that what we today call “ethnicity.”<sup>1</sup> As a diaspora Jew, he experienced multi-ethnicity in his early life. When he “persecuted” Christian communities (Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6) he did so with a clear idea of the boundaries that would separate Israel from its surrounds.<sup>2</sup> Upon converting to Christ, it seems that Paul felt an immediate calling as an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; 2:7). Working as a missionary in the eastern Mediterranean and engaging with mixed communities, he would have regularly encountered ethnic diversity. There is, therefore, good reason for a focus on Paul when looking

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful approach to “ethnicity” for exegetical purposes is offered by C. W. Concannon, “*When you were Gentiles*”: *Spectres of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence* (Synkrisis: Comparative Approaches to early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture; New Haven, Conn., 2014): “I take ethnicity to be a form of rhetoric that is deployed to mark boundaries between and among groups of people” (16), “oscillating between poles of fixity and fluidity” (17). – I thank Jasper Donelan for his thorough style check of my English text, serving as a test case for cooperation between distinct ethnicities!

<sup>2</sup> For the ethnic dimensions of Paul’s “manner of life in Judaism”, see M. Konradt, “Mein Wandel einst im ‘Joudaismos’” (Gal 1:13), in *Fremdbilder – Selbstbilder: Imaginationen des Judentums von der Antike bis in die Neuzeit* (ed. R. Bloch et al.; Basel, 2010), 25–67, esp. 39–41. See the discussion in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (ed. M. D. Nanos and M. Zetterholm; Minneapolis, 2015).

at ethnicity. We will start, however, not with the apostle himself, but rather with some observations on the late second century.

# 1. Christians as a “third race.” The Letter to Diognetus

In the study of “ethnicity”, the so-called Letter to Diognetus has proven to be an important text, particularly in Denise Buell’s monograph *Why This New Race*.<sup>3</sup> The second-century text is a protreptic discourse (*lógos protreptikós*), a speech encouraging its readers to embrace the Christian way of life.<sup>4</sup>

The Letter to Diognetus establishes Christians as a “third race” alongside the Greeks and the Jews. These three peoples seem to encompass all of humanity. The classification is presented in the prologue (1:1):

“Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you are quite eager to learn about the religion of the Christians and are making such clear and careful inquiry about them, both about which God they accept and how they worship him – so that they all ignore the world and scorn death, neither acknowledging those whom the Greeks consider to be gods nor subscribing to the superstition of Jews – and about what deep affection they have for one another, and about why this new race or way of life has come about now and not before”.<sup>5</sup>

The *theosébeia* of the Christians, their “pious mode of worshipping God,” is opposed, on the one hand, to the polytheistic religion of the Greeks, and on the other to the “superstition of the Jews.” In addition to their religion, the author mentions a specific type of social coherence characteristic of the Christians, namely their *philostorgía*. The author appears to transform the two main pillars of Christian ethics, namely the relationship to God and the relationship to one’s neighbors (Mk 12:29–31 parr.), into something like a Christian ethnic identity marker, summed up in the terms *theosébeia* and *philostorgía*. Christianity, the author of the letter writes, is a “new race or way of life” (καὶνὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα).

At first glance, we have here a list of three races or peoples: Greek, Jews and Christians, all characterized by their religion. This tripartite model

<sup>3</sup> D. K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York, 2005), esp. 29–32, 36.

<sup>4</sup> On the genre, see H. E. Lona, *An Diognet* (Kommentar zu frühchristlichen Apologeten 8; Freiburg, 2001), 21–33.

<sup>5</sup> Translation by C. N. Jefford (ed.), *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford, 2013).

shapes the first part of the text (2:1–6:10).<sup>6</sup> In this section, the author actively constructs alterity, outlining the distinctive forms of worship of the Greeks and of the Jews.<sup>7</sup> But before working through this catalogue, he addresses his reader: Diognetus is invited to become “a new human being as if from the beginning” and, in doing so, he becomes a “hearer of a new logos,” a new teaching (2:1).<sup>8</sup> The focus is clearly on the idea of something *new*, formulated in terms of creation, and realized by reading this text – a clear reference to what it means to become a member of the third race (i.e. to become a Christian).

We turn now to the portrayal of Christians in chapters 5 and 6, leaving aside the traditional arguments against Greek idolatry and Jewish superstition. The author unpacks here the “mystery” of Christian *theosébeia*, their “peculiar mode of worshipping God”. In chapter 5, we find a series of criteria for being an *éthnos*.<sup>9</sup> A tripartite catalogue of ethnicity (territory, language and customs, 5:1–2; 5:4) is augmented by a reference to the Christians’ teaching (5:3), a central aspect of their religion. The rhetoric of *Ad Diognetum* is sophisticated: the criteria of territory, language and customs do not correspond to Christianity. Christians “inhabit Greek and barbarian cities as well,” and are no different in terms of their lifestyles; they “follow local customs with respect to clothing and food and the rest of life.” However, “they illustrate the admirable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship” (θαυμαστὴν καὶ ὁμολογουμένως παράδοξον κατάστασιν τῆς ἐαυτῶν πολιτείας).

The text progressively broaches other metaphorical fields, appropriating elements from the Pauline letters. The first shift is from ethnic to civic and political categories. The author works with sharp contrasts between foreigners and citizens, outsiders and natives.<sup>10</sup> This is

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, chapters 5 and 6 serve as a bridge to the exposition of doctrinal matters in chapters 7–9. For the soteriological and Christological perspective in these chapters, see B. D. Crowe, “Oh sweet Exchange! The Soteriological Significance of the Incarnation in the *Epistle to Diognetus*”, *ZNW* 102 (2011), 96–109.

<sup>7</sup> See T. Nicklas, “Epistula ad Diognetum (Diognetus): The Christian ‘New Genos’ and its Construction of the Others,” in *Sensitivity towards Outsiders* (ed. J. Kok et al.; WUNT II/364; Tübingen, 2014), 490–504.

<sup>8</sup> For the “new” in Diognetus, see R. Brändle, *Die Ethik der “Schrift an Diognet.” Eine Wiederaufnahme paulinischer und johanneischer Theologie am Ausgang des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (ATHANT 64; Zürich, 1975), 86–90; Lona, *Diognet* (see n. 4), 88f. (“Wer sich so eifrig für die christliche Religion interessiert, gibt zu erkennen, dass er ein Anhänger dieser ‘neuen Lehre’ werden will”). The “new man” is (*pace* Lona, 88) significant in several New Testament passages (Eph 2:15; 4:24; cf. Col 3:10f.; Ign. Eph 20:1).

<sup>9</sup> Literature on ethnicity often recalls a famous passage in Herodotus 8.144.2, where the author lists four (or five) criteria for Greekness: kinship (having the same blood [ὄμαίμον]), shared language, shared sanctuaries of the gods and sacrifice, and similar ways of life or customs. See I. Malkin, “Introduction” to *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity* (ed. idem; Cambridge, MA, 2001), 1–28, here 5f.; 22; D. Konstan, “*To Hellēnikon ethnos*: Ethnicity and the Construction of ancient Greek Identity,” in: id. loc. 29–50, here 32–34; J. M. Hall, “The nature and expression of ethnicity: An anthropological View,” in idem, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1997), 17–33, here: 7. Six criteria for ‘ethnicity’ are listed by J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (ed.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford Readers; Oxford, 1996), 6f.

<sup>10</sup> For an implied critique of the Roman society, see B. H. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as other in early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2009), 64–77, 112. The Letter to Diognetus takes up several Christian and originally Jewish traditions about the believers’ existence between foreignness and nationhood; see R. Feldmeier, “The ‘Nation’ of Strangers: Social Contempt and its

framed by paradoxical formulations taken from Paul's Corinthian correspondence. At the very end of the passage, at 5:17, the text returns to ethnic categories: "they [sc. Christians] are attacked as foreigners by Jews, and they are persecuted by Greeks."

In chapter 6, there is a further, decisive shift. The Christians are compared with the soul in an animated body.<sup>11</sup> Since Christians "are scattered through all the cities of the world", an analogy is offered: the soul too is "dispersed through all the members of the body." The author takes up, on the one hand, philosophical conceptions from Platonic teachings on the soul and its relation to the body. On the other hand, the author refers to several old Christian and Jewish traditions that bestow a special status upon the righteous and pious as those who maintain the world or, at least, are delaying its end.<sup>12</sup> So we are confronted here with a quite different field of metaphors. The main theme remains present, however, when the author refers to the *theosébeia* of the Christians as invisible (6:4). The text highlights a peculiar interplay between the visibility and the invisibility of the Christians' religion, between its place in the world and beyond, between cultural affirmation and cultural separation.<sup>13</sup> In this movement, the heritage of Paul has a special impact on the theology of *Ad Diognetum*.<sup>14</sup>

We turn now to the question of ethnicity, namely the status of ethnic categories in the search for a Christian identity.<sup>15</sup> Ethnic categories such as the idea of three peoples and, especially, the appearance of a "third kind" (the Greek word employed is *genos*, with its broad semantic spectrum) serve as a platform for explaining the Christians and their religion – this explanation has two dimensions: one *ad extra*, addressing educated pagans, and the other, *ad intra*, addressing Christian self-identity.<sup>16</sup> Based on their religion, the Christians are, from this perspective, perceived as a distinct *éthnos* alongside the Greeks and Jews.<sup>17</sup>

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theological Interpretation in ancient Judaism and early Christianity," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; BiInS 19; Leiden, 2002), 241–270.

<sup>11</sup> The author does not refer to the soul of the world, but to an individual soul. See Lona, *Diognet* (see n. 4), 180–182.

<sup>12</sup> For the cosmic and political role of the Christians, see the material in H. I. Marrou (ed.), *À Diognète* (SC 33<sup>bis</sup>; Paris, 1965), 146–171.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Lieu, "The Forging of Christian Identity and the Letter to Diognetus," in *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (Studies of the New Testament and its World; London, 2002), 171–189.

<sup>14</sup> See A. Lindemann, "Paulinische Theologie im Brief an Diognet," in *Paulus, Apostel und Lehrer der Kirche* (Tübingen, 1999), 280–293; M. F. Bird, "The Reception of Paul in the Epistle to Diognetus," in *Paul and the Second Century* (ed. M. F. Bird and J. R. Dodson; Library of New Testament studies 412; London, 2011), 70–90; R. Brändle, "Ad Diognetum. Eine Wiederaufnahme paulinischer und johanneischer Theologie am Ausgang des zweiten Jahrhunderts", in *À Diognète. Visions chrétiennes face à l'empire romain* (ed. G. Aragione et al.; Cahiers du Groupe suisse d'études patristiques 1; Prahins, 2012), 39–52.

<sup>15</sup> A helpful survey of ancient terms of ethnicity (*éthnos*, *génos*) especially in ancient Christian texts is offered by A. P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (OECs; Oxford, 2006), 33–51.

<sup>16</sup> See, again, J. Lieu, "Introduction" to: *Neither Jew nor Greek* (see n. 13), 1–8; *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford, 2004), esp. 11–21, 259–266 ("the race of the Christians").

<sup>17</sup> In the second century, we encounter another type of ethnicity-term when Justin calls the Christians "'Gentiles' as a transethnic entity drawn from πάντα τὰ ἔθνη": see T. L. Donaldson, "'We Gentiles': Ethnicity and Identity in Justin Martyr," *Early Christianity* 4 (2013), 216–241 (quotation: 228).

And yet, in our treatise, there is a strong tendency to go beyond an ethnic definition of Christianity. First, we have the statement about Christians being no different from all others regarding their territory, language, and customs. However, this does not prevent the Christians from forming a distinct “ethnicity”, since it is religion that is the peculiarity of the “third race.” More important is how quickly the author shifts from ethnic to other categories – to civic and political metaphors (mainly citizenship), and then to psychological and cosmological ones as well. This shift fits well with the language of the paradox of Christian identity. The rhetoric of paradox reduces the force of the ethnic categories. Ethnicity is but one formative pattern among others in the construction of Christian identity, complemented by other metaphorical clusters that appear more central to Christian self-definition.

Before turning to Paul, I mention briefly the remaining documentary evidence for the model of the three genera of humanity.<sup>18</sup> The *Kerygma of Peter* also contains a tripartite pattern; Christians are not explicitly called

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<sup>18</sup> See A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums: in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, <sup>4</sup>1924), 259–289; M. Wolter, ““Ein neues Geschlecht”? Das frühe Christentum auf der Suche nach seiner Identität,” in *Ein neues Geschlecht? Entwicklung des frühchristlichen Selbstbewusstseins* (ed. M. Lang; NTOA 105, Göttingen, 2014), 282–298.

a “third race”, but they do display a “new kind of worship,” a “third kind of worship of God.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of the *Apology of Aristides*, the textual inconsistencies are noteworthy: whereas the Syriac – which is the best version – and Armenian manuscripts refer to four kinds of humanity (barbarians, Greeks, Jews and Christians),<sup>20</sup> the Greek version has only three, but with further classifications.<sup>21</sup> There seems to be a second-century tradition – at least in the case of Aristides and Diognetus – that portrayed Christianity via ethnic categories based on the criterion of religion. This is situated in a framework of apologetic presentations of Christianity that include a self-definition of Christian identity.<sup>22</sup> However, the variability of the pattern is so broad that we cannot place too much weight on its historical importance.<sup>23</sup> The triad itself comprises three different modules: the portrayal of pagan worship originates in the Jewish contrasting of pious Jews with corrupted Greeks; the portrayal of Jews exploits pagan stereotypes (Jews are regarded as superstitious); and, finally, the portrayal of Christians relies on several early Christian self-designations.

<sup>19</sup> *KerPetr* frg. 5 Dobschütz; cf. M. Cambe (ed.), *Kerygma Petri* (CCSA 15; Turnhout, 2003), 156f.: “les (pratiques) des Grecs et des Juifs sont périmées; c’est vous qui le vénerez d’une manière nouvelle, selon un troisième type, (vous) les chrétiens (ἡμεῖς δὲ οἱ καινῶς αὐτὸν τρίτῳ γένει σεβόμενοι Χριστιανοί)”; “for the ways of the Greeks and Jews are old, but we are they that worship him in a new way in a third generation (*or* race), even Christians” (transl. M.R. James). The translation offered by W. Schneemelcher, adopted in the English edition of the “Neutestamentliche Apokryphen,” is misleading: “we are Christians, who as a third race worship him in a new way” (frg. 2.d): *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 2. Writings relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and related Subjects*, revised edition (ed. W. Schneemelcher; transl. R. McL. Wilson; Westminster, 1992), 39.

<sup>20</sup> In chapter 2, the Syriac text reads (translation from *Aristide. Apologie* [ed. B. Pouderon and M.-J. Pierre; SC 470; Paris, 2003]): “il existe quatre races d’hommes en ce monde: les barbares et les Grecs, les juifs et les chrétiens” (2:2). Whereas the three races might be traced back to the three sons of Noah (Gen 10:1) the author fuses the pattern with the Hellenistic-Jewish triad of Greek, Jews and barbarians (Pouderon, loc. cit., 322–324). – 16:3 (Syriac): “c’est vraiment un nouveau peuple (ܡܫܝܚܐ ... ܡܫܝܚܐ), dans lequel se mêle quelque chose de divin.”

<sup>21</sup> The main pattern (τρία γένη εἰσὶν ἀνθρώπων ἐν τῷδε τῷ κόσμῳ) contains followers of idols, Jews and Christians. The first are again differentiated into Chaldeans, Greeks and Egyptians (2:2). This is precisely the pattern that dictates the following argumentation of the apology and seems, therefore, to be a later clarification of the textual tradition.

<sup>22</sup> Harnack, *Mission* (see n. 18), 281–289, referring to some passages in Tertullian, identifies the origin of the “three races” in pagan traditions, namely in reproaches against Christians (“Even in the circus people cried, ‘Usque quo genus tertium?’”, from the English translation by A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the first three Centuries*, Vol. 1 [London/New York, 1908], 273). The evidence is hardly compelling since the – outstanding – label of a “third (!) kind” would lend importance to the early Christians (and to the Jews as well) that they never could have acquired among pagans in the second century. The data given by Tertullian, esp. his reference to the scene in the arena (Tert., *Scorp.* 10:10 [CCSL 2, 1089]), are much more a product of his sophisticated rhetoric than of historical facts – irrespective of Tertullian’s own unhappiness with the designation of the *tertium genus*. The trigger for all that might have been the observer’s impression of the Christians as a ‘strange kind’ of people. It is of interest that Harnack himself is not fully consistent in his argument (“the pagans did borrow this conception,” 275).

<sup>23</sup> See the caution displayed by Wolter, “Geschlecht” (see n. 18), 291f.

## 2. Three *éthnē* in Paul: The case of 1 Cor 1:18–25; 10:32

We turn now to the first century and to Paul. At first glance, we find here the Jewish distinctions of ethnic categories, namely Gentiles versus Jews. In some places, “the Greeks” replace “the Gentiles” (Rom 1:16; 2:9f.; 3:10; 1 Cor 1:22; 12:13; Gal 3:28). Paul employs the Greek distinction of Greeks and barbarians only once (Rom 1:14), a distinction to which we shall return. For the moment, I focus on the three kinds of humanity-pattern found in 1 Corinthians. The main text is 1:18–25.

Within the context of divisions in the community of Corinth, the apostle offers a systematized reflection about his proclamation of the Gospel: the “word of the cross” is described in terms of its reception in various contexts. The first and main differentiation lies in the separation of two groups, “those who are perishing” and “us who are being saved” (1:18). It also becomes apparent that Paul is engaging in a discourse about “wisdom” that was attractive to the Corinthian community. At 22–24, Paul shifts to ethnic categories: “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom.” This distinction is later rendered as “Jews and Gentiles.” In this way, *Héllēnes* and *éthnē* are conflated (from a Jewish perspective).<sup>24</sup>

At 23, the dual model is augmented by a third category, “us” who “proclaim Christ crucified.” Thus we have here, again, a tripartite division for structuring the human world. This passage seems to be a test case for “ethnicity” with regard to the Christian communities. Unlike in the tripartite race model, the criterion by which the *éthnē* are defined is not clear. It is not religion, but rather a specific cultural feature that is under discussion. The Jews are identified by their messianic belief – if “signs” refer to the powerful manifestations of God in history and the legitimation they

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<sup>24</sup> See H. Windisch, “Ἑλλην κτλ.,” *TDNT* 2 (1935), 504–516, here 513: “For Paul Ἕλληνες is thus the non-Jewish part of the race. The formula is determined by the outlook of the Jew, especially of the Anatolian Jew of the dispersion, of the missionary from Judaism who crosses the borders of the Jewish ghetto into the cultural sphere of the Ἕλληνες.”



provide to his messengers. The “wisdom” of the Greeks seems to point to the enormous role of philosophy and knowledge within the parameters of Greek education, life and politics.

We are dealing here with cultural rather than ethnic terms. Indeed, it is well known that the term *Héllēn* refers, in Hellenistic texts, more to participation in Greek *paideia* and culture than to a “sharing the same blood.”<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Ethnicity and culturalist perspectives

It has become common to understand “ethnicity” within the framework of discursive constructions of identity, rather than in terms of genetic origins. Ethnicity is a matter of culture and not of nature. Ethnicity needs, accordingly, to be discussed in terms of cultural theories.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, culturalism offers a paradigm that embraces and integrates several elements characteristic of ancient societies, such as ethnicity, gender, social status, and economics.

Paul’s statement about the “word of the cross” is an early Christian voice from within a broader cultural setting and debates about true wisdom and philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Paul proclaims an alternative type of wisdom. He announces a wisdom from outside; he puts forward a wisdom from below. This voice seems to express cultural tensions in first-century Mediterranean culture – a culture that had undergone Hellenization and fused together with the political macrostructure of the Roman Empire. Under this global culture, we see several partial cultures or subcultures articulating their own kind of ethnicity, their own way of life, their own wisdom – sometimes in sharp conflict with the dominant culture and resisting the centripetal power of the Empire. The “Umwertung aller Werte” (1 Cor 1:27f.), symbolized by

<sup>25</sup> Cf. above the passage from Herodotus (see n. 9).

<sup>26</sup> See esp. F. Barth, “Introduction” to: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (ed. idem; London, 1969), 9–38. About “disentangling of the notions of ethnicity and culture” see H. Vermeulen and C. Govers in their “Introduction” to *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’* (ed. idem; Amsterdam, 1994), 1–9, esp. 2–5. “Culture and ethnicity are not the same,” St. Fenton, *Ethnicity* (Key Concepts; Cambridge, 2010), 19s.

<sup>27</sup> For two examples of ancient wisdom discourses, see my article “Toren als Weise. Berührungen zwischen dem Äsoproman und dem 1. Korintherbrief,” in *Paulus. Werk und Wirkung. Festschrift A. Lindemann* (ed. P.G. Klumbies and D. du Toit; Tübingen, 2013), 3–20.

the cross of Jesus Christ,<sup>28</sup> can be interpreted in culturalist terms.

#### 4. A side glance to Tatian, the “barbarian philosopher”

There is an instructive example, dating to the second century, of the cultural frictions outlined above. This is the *Oratio ad Graecos* by the Syrian-born, Christian apologist Tatian.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Justin, Tatian attacks the Greeks, their *paideia* and their wisdom in an aggressive and self-assured manner. He promotes himself as an exponent of a barbarian philosophy that is better than the perverted and weak Greek version:

“Do not maintain a totally hostile attitude to foreigners, men of Greece (μὴ πάνυ φιλέχθρως διατίθεσθε πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἕλληνες), nor resent their beliefs. For which of your own practices did not have a foreign origin? [...] Therefore stop calling imitations inventions. [...] This was the reason why we abandoned your school of wisdom (τούτου χάριν ἀπεταξάμεθα τῇ παρ’ ὑμῶν σοφίᾳ), even though I was myself very distinguished in it.”<sup>30</sup>

Tatian works with many of the figures and arguments familiar from the extant Hellenistic Jewish apologists – the argument of age, the trope of theft, the genealogy of the inventors of culture, and so on. It is of special interest that he uses the Greek distinction of Greeks versus barbarians, although he inverts it completely.<sup>31</sup> Jews, incidentally, are virtually absent

<sup>28</sup> For questions of Pauline “Kreuzestheologie”, see my article “Weisheit am Kreuzweg. Zum theologischen Programm von 1Kor 1 und 2,” in *Kreuzestheologie im Neuen Testament* (ed. A. Dettwiler and J. Zumstein; WUNT 151, Tübingen, 2002), 43–58; M. Konradt, “Die korinthische Weisheit und das Wort vom Kreuz. Erwägungen zur korinthischen Problemkonstellation und paulinischen Intention in 1Kor 1–4,” *ZNW* 94 (2003), 181–214.

<sup>29</sup> For Tatian situated in a culturalist perspective, see my article: “Barbarenweisheit? Zum Stellenwert der Philosophie in der frühchristlichen Theologie,” in *PHILOSOPHIA in der Konkurrenz von Schulen, Wissenschaften und Religionen. Zur Pluralisierung des Philosophiebegriffs in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike* (ed. Ch. Riedweg; Stuttgart, 2017 [in print]).

<sup>30</sup> Tatian, *or.* 1:1; 1:2; 1:5; translation from M. Whittaker (ed.), *Tatian. Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments* (OECT; Oxford, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> J. Lössl, “Bildung? Welche Bildung? Zur Bedeutung der Ausdrücke ‘Griechen’ und ‘Barbaren’ in Tatians ‘Rede an die Griechen,’” in *Frühchristentum und Kultur* (ed. F. R. Prostmeier; FA.E 2, Freiburg, 2007), 127–153; H.-G. Nesselrath, “Two Syrians and Greek Paideia. Lucian and Tatian,” in *Literature, Scholarship, Philosophy, and History. Classical Studies in Memory of Ioannis Taifacos* (ed. G. A. Xenis; Stuttgart, 2015), 129–142; P. Gemeinhardt, “Tatian und die antike Paideia. Ein Wanderer zwischen zwei (Bildungs-) Welten,” in *Gegen falsche Götter und falsche Bildung. Tatian, Rede an die Griechen* (ed. H.-G. Nesselrath; Sapere 28, Tübingen, 2016), 247–266.

from this ethnic constellation – Tatian seems to place them alongside the Christians when he refers to the Bible, Moses and the prophets, and to shared traditions.

The end of Tatian’s speech to the Greeks is noteworthy. Ethnic origin and cultural formation are explicitly linked (42:1):

“All this, men of Greece, I have compiled for you – I Tatian, a philosopher among the barbarians (ὁ κατὰ βαρβάρους φιλοσοφῶν), born in the land of the Assyrians, and educated first in your learning and secondly in what I profess to preach (παιδευθεὶς δὲ πρῶτον μὲν τὰ ὑμέτερα, δεύτερον δὲ ἄτινα νῦν κηρύττειν ἐπαγγέλλομαι).”

This kind of cultural ethnic discourse can be found in Hellenistic Jewish literature too, not only in apologetical writings,<sup>32</sup> but also in apocalyptic texts. Especially the revelations of Henoah offer teachings that correspond to dominant Greek wisdom and science.

## 5. Once more: ethnicity in 1 Corinthians 1

The Christians and their contra-wisdom need to be situated in a framework of cultural friction within global Hellenistic-Roman culture. Here, the ethnic paradigm has a specific cultural dimension and includes culture-critical elements. The ethnic discourse is, as such, part of a cultural contest in the Graeco-Roman world.

Moving on from this macroscopic perspective, I return to our passage in 1 Cor. We encounter in vv. 22f. an ethnic distinction of Jewish origin – the polarity between Jews and Gentiles or Greeks – but augmented by a third group, namely Christians. The tripartite model reappears at 10:32: “Avoid giving offense, whether to Jews or Greeks or the church of God.” V. 33 indicates that this catalogue embraces humanity as a whole (“just as I also please all men in all things”).<sup>33</sup> The phrase πάντα πᾶσιν picks up on the earlier passage where the apostle spoke about his ability to adapt

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. E. S. Green, “Jewish Perspectives on Greek Culture and Ethnicity,” in: Malkin, *Perceptions* (see n. 9), 347–373 (the Jews “simultaneously differentiated their nation from that of the Greeks and justified their own immersion in a world of Hellenic civilization,” 366).

<sup>33</sup> “That Paul intends to include all people under the categories of *Jews*, *Greeks* and the *church of God* is verified in the following verse where Paul speaks of his attempt to please ‘everyone,’” R. E. Ciampa and B. S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PiNTC; Grand Rapids / Cambridge, 2010), 497.

(9:19–22). Nevertheless, there are clear limits to the representation of Christianity as an ethnicity. I will mention four points, some of which will remind us of the Letter to Diognetus.

- (1.) The main division in our text is not an ethnic but a soteriological one, namely the difference between the “lost ones” and the “saved ones,” mentioned in the programmatic statement from v. 18: *tertium non datur*.
- (2.) In v. 24, the distinction between Jews and Greeks reappears among the Christians, the “called ones.” What seemed at first to be three groups, appears now as four, two on each side..
- (3.) From v. 26, the ethnic categories shift to social categories. Ethnicity is just one element among other markers of identity.
- (4.) In vv. 26–31, Paul focusses on the activity of God, his election and his creative power. V. 28 refers to the *creatio ex nihilo*. Whatever the Christians might be – they belong to a completely different order and level. This is evident also in 1 Cor 10:32 where the “church of God” is opposed to “Jews and Greeks.” The “church of God” is not an ethnic, indeed not even a para-ethnic term.

Taking the above points together, the ethnic profile of the Christians has become a matter of secondary consideration. It is not inexistent, but represents in no way a pillar of Paul’s ecclesiology.

This is corroborated by the formulas referred to in German exegesis as “Entdifferenzierungsformeln” (1 Cor 12:3; Gal 3:28f.; 6:15f.; Col 3:11). In their first half, which is negative, these formulas are highly standardized. Ethnic differences are abandoned in Christ; Jews and Greeks are equal. In the second half, there is, conversely, much more variety. The most striking wording is found in Gal 6:15, with the “new creation.” The community of believers goes beyond what might be conceived of as an *éthnos*.

The formulas in Galatians that point to a new creation are complemented by metaphors from another field. In chapter 3, the Christians join the heritage of Abraham. In 6:15f., they are identified with “the Israel of God.” We meet here a “theo-ethnic” self-description that echoes Jewish claims of being the elected people of God. We find this “theo-ethnic” element also in 1 Cor 1, where the language of creation is combined with that of election; God chose the foolish, the lowly, and so on. Needless to say, in the Jewish tradition the language of election and of creation are intertwined. In the case of Paul, they are radicalized. His theology of the cross is founded on a deep theological conviction, centered on God’s activity, his creation and his election.

In sum, we find in 1 Cor 1 a statement that suggests clearly the language of ethnicity, pointing to the universal world of the non-believers. By the mere juxtaposition of the believers as a third group, Christianity too is at first glance understood in terms of ethnicity. On the other hand, this ethnic self-description is dominated by other figures that pervade Paul's ecclesiology and soteriology in such a strong manner that the ethnic profile of Christianity is pushed to the margins.<sup>34</sup> Instead of being a "third kind" of humanity, Christians are depicted as a "new creation" and, at the same time, as the elected people of God.

#### 6. Paul's ability to adapt to his addressees (1 Cor 9:19–23)

Apart from the aforementioned passages (1:22–24, 10:32, 12:31), Paul refers to ethnic entities also when he explains his ability to adapt (9:19–23). Dealing with the problem of food sacrificed to idols, he portrays himself as an example of Christian freedom realized by serving others. In vv. 20f., he refers to his conduct among Jews as being different from that among Gentiles.<sup>35</sup> Paul moves progressively away from distinct ethnic terminology. He starts with an explicit reference to the Jews, who are defined by their observance of the Torah (v. 20: "to the Jews I became like a Jew"). The Gentiles are identified specifically as being not under the law (v. 21: "to those not having the law I became like one not having the law"). He depicts his addressees from a Jewish point of view. But the argument then takes another direction, when Paul refers to the "weak" (v. 22a), intentionally leaving aside the "strong".<sup>36</sup> Finally, v. 22b goes beyond all ethnic labels with a strong, universalizing claim that highlights Paul's basic missionary principle ("I have become all things to all people").

<sup>34</sup> It is not by accident that the catalogue of early Christian self-designations offered by P. R. Trebilco does not contain any specific ethnic notions: *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 2014), 471f.: "there can be little question that he is reflecting on his differing conduct in Jewish and Gentile settings, the central issue being questions of Jewish law." "Those under the law" in V. 20b are the easiest way understood AS synonymous with the Jews; differently Concannon, "*Gentiles*" (see n. 1), 30: "Paul is here referring to Gentiles who had tried to follow the demands of the Mosaic law." This notion would fit much more to what we know from the Galatian communities (4:21).

<sup>36</sup> "Seine Identifikation mit den ‚Starken‘ (vgl. Röm 15,1 [...]) erwähnt der Apostel wohl deshalb nicht, um ihnen nicht Auftrieb zu geben," D. Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5; Göttingen, 2010), 319.

Adapting to the Jews and the lawless, i.e. the Gentiles, Paul claims for himself another kind of identity, being himself only “like a Jew” and “like a lawless man.” Read within the context of the passages discussed earlier (1:22–24 and 10:32) the apostle presents himself as an agent of another kind of people, being neither Jew nor Gentile. One can read v. 22b in terms of an implicit Christological profile of Paul’s apostleship, since it was Jesus Christ who was sent forth “born of a woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those who were under the Law” (Gal 4:4f.).<sup>37</sup> However, Paul portrays himself not as a representative of a “third kind” of people, standing apart from Jews and Gentiles. He quickly moves beyond ethnic elements when he tries to explain his identity as an apostle of Christ as being different from Jewish and Gentile identity as well.<sup>38</sup>

## 7. Ethnic sensitivity in Romans

In his letter to the Romans, Paul displays a sensitivity for ethnic matters. In the *prooemium* he addresses the Romans as an *étnē*, alongside “the rest of the Gentiles” (1:13). His self-description as “a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish” (1:14) exploits in its first part a universal formula, referring to the classical Greek distinction.<sup>39</sup> The Jews themselves are not part of that ethnic panorama; Paul’s language is based on the *Jewish* adaption of the Greek dual. In v. 16, we find the first instance of the well-known “first”-statements (cf. 2:9f.). The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to every believer, to the Jew first and to the Greek as well.” Here we have the Jewish distinction,<sup>40</sup> placing Jews in the first rank. The Greeks and the Gentiles are for the most part

<sup>37</sup> Condescension as a pattern for divine agency was already identified by the Alexandrian Fathers, cf. S. Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung. Eine Untersuchung zur Eleutheria bei Paulus und in seiner Umwelt* (FRLANT 147; Göttingen, 1989), 217f.; M. M. Mitchell, “Pauline Accommodation and ‘Condescension’ (συγκατάβασις). 1 Cor 9:19–23 and the History of Influence,” in *Paul beyond the Judaism Hellenism Divide* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen, Louisville, 2001), 197–214.

<sup>38</sup> Concannon, “Gentiles” (see n. 1), 27–46 interprets Paul’s adaptable self (“his ethnically malleable body”) resulting from his enslavement to others by reference to his self-mastery (vv. 24–27): “Paul’s ethnically flexible body is presented to the Corinthians as a model of ascetic self-control and the selfless exercise of a divine calling” (35).

<sup>39</sup> This is “a standard phrase to include all races and classes within the Gentile world,” J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, 1988), 33.

<sup>40</sup> “Wie Paulus in V. 14 mit ‚Griechen und Barbaren‘ die Menschheit aus griechischer Perspektive in den Blick genommen hat, so nimmt er hier die jüdische Perspektive ein, und unterteilt alle Menschen in Juden und Nichtjuden,” M. Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8* (EKK VI/1; Neukirchen/Ostfildern, 2014), 118.

identical, as in the later parts of Romans. The whole argument in this letter is governed by the conviction that, in Christ, the soteriological difference between Jews and Gentiles is abandoned (2:11; 3:9; 3:22; 3:29; 10:12f.).<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the Jews are distinguished by ascribing to them a “first” position regarding their role in God’s history with Israel. However, in spite of his ethnic sensitivity, in Romans, Paul never links ethnic categories with the Christians. What we find, instead, is the notion of *Israel*,<sup>42</sup> the Christians being the people of God be they Jews or Gentiles. This represents, once more, a “theo-ethnic” conception of Christianity.<sup>43</sup>

## 8. Conclusion: Ethnicity in Paul

This essay is summed up in five points:

1. Paul is keenly aware of ethnic matters and offers, therefore, a fine platform for studies on ethnicity. He depicts all humanity in ethnic terms; as an apostle of Christ, he addresses “Jews and Greeks.” Apart from the historians, there is probably no other ancient author who views humanity so dominantly in ethnic terms.
2. One significant trope in Paul is that of “Jews and Greeks.” This is the Jewish version of the Greek contrast between “Greeks and barbarians.” In second-century literature, the Jewish-Christian catalogue is re-Hellenized (Greeks/Jews/sometimes complemented by barbarians). Naturally, the Greek distinction continues to be vivid; Christians and Jews count, then, among the barbarians (Justin; Tatian).
3. At least in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul portrays Christians as a special kind of group, together with Jews and Greeks. This ethnic profile of Christianity is based on a cultural criterion (namely a specific element of religious teaching: the kerygma of Christ). The tripartite representation of humanity might be compared with similar catalogues in second-century literature, but without any direct intertextual relationship. These texts,

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<sup>41</sup> A rather different position is taken by C. J. Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs. A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford, 2007), esp. 137–148 (“In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes not to a group of Christians” who follow a religion free of ethnic ties, but to a group of gentiles who become ethnically linked with Jews through baptism into Christ,” 148).

<sup>42</sup> See the article by M. Wolter, “Ethnizität und Identität bei Paulus,” EC 8 (2017), 336–353.

<sup>43</sup> Concerning Israel as “the paradigm of the God-created ethnicity”, see the article by J. Barclay, “An Identity Received from God. The Theological Configuration of Paul’s Kinship Discourse,” EC 8 (2017), 354–372.

outlining Christian identity by means of ethnic categories, make sense in the context of a multicultural and multi-ethnic society. The need for Christian self-definition is motivated by demands both from outside and from inside. 1 Corinthians, with its special interest in Christian-pagan boundaries, might also be interpreted within such a framework.

4. The impact of ethnicity on Paul's portrayal of the Christians is characterized by two dominant elements: (1.) Since the ethnic borders are abandoned in Christ his believers form a completely new reality in contrast to the basic structures of "this world." They proclaim to be "a new creation." (2.) Christians are identified with what Old Testament and Jewish traditions called the elected people of God. Along these lines, the past of the Gentiles is rewritten since they receive a new origin. Israel's history becomes their own history (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 10:1–4). Paul attaches this new history of the Christ-believers especially to Abraham (Gal 3; Rom 4). But there is a basic caveat: Paul's ecclesiology is not built on a "heilsgeschichtliches Kontinuum,"<sup>44</sup> but rather on a theocentric notion of election and recreation. Paul is able to emphasize the "Ehrenprimat" of Jewish Israel but without re-importing a soteriological aspect.

5. Paul is doubtless aware of the ethnic heritage of Gentiles and Jews within Christian communities; "the called ones" remain Greeks or Jews in the flesh.<sup>45</sup> However, he rarely treats contemporary problems within the community with recourse to ethnic categories; these are virtually absent in his handling of frictions between the strong and weak in Rom 14/15 or in 1 Cor 8–10. The ethnic terms in Paul's interpretation of the Antiochian incident (Gal 2:14f.) are only part of his retrospective. Dealing with opponents and with their appeal to ethnicity, Paul refers uncompromisingly to the "neither Jew nor Greek" principle. And based

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<sup>44</sup> In recent Anglo-American exegesis, the position of the German "Heilsgeschichte" has been renewed by N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 4 (London, 2013). See the discussion in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul. A critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright* (ed. Ch. Heilig et al.; WUNT II/413; Tübingen, 2016), esp. O. Wischmeyer, "N. T. Wright's Biblical Hermeneutics considered from a German exegetical Perspective" (loc. cit., 173–100), 95–97.

<sup>45</sup> "Paul does not [...] 'erase' or 'eradicate' cultural specificities, but *relativize* them," (italics in the original) J. Barclay, "'Neither Jew nor Greek': Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul," in: Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity* (see n. 10), 197–214, here 211.



on that principle, Paul is able to represent Christianity as 'Israel' by means of "theo-ethnic" and, at the same time, "mono-ethnic" categories.